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The Oasis Project continues to grow as it reaches more underserved kids in the Kettle Moraine School District

[Alec Johnson](#), Now News Group Published 11:54 a.m. CT April 10, 2018 | Updated 12:05 p.m. CT April 10, 2018



(Photo: Submitted)

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A group dedicated to helping underserved children in Lake Country is growing — and founder Jan Frans doesn't want to stop anytime soon.

Frans, a former Kettle Moraine Middle School teacher, started [The Oasis Project](#) in September 2015, a network of faith-based and civic-minded volunteers who work with students in need in western Waukesha County.

The project started with 10 tutors working with 27 students at one KM elementary school. Now, just three years later, it has 40 tutors working with more than 100 students at five district schools.

Frans hopes to expand the program even further — perhaps to other school districts — in the future.

Frans has also enlisted the help of retired WITI Fox 6 sports anchor Tom Pipines to help with the project. He and a cinematographer helped create a short film to promote the group, which they have also done to help other nonprofits.

Starting the group

Frans started the group when the idea to help children in need wouldn't stop plaguing her.

She spent time in 2014 visiting other nonprofit organizations and came away uncertain of whether she could do what they were doing. Frans decided she just needed to jump in and do something.

"I'm like 'OK, I'm a teacher. I've got a bunch of retired teacher friends. There are kids in our district whose folks can't afford tutors. What can we do for them?' " said Frans.

Frans approached Kettle Moraine Superintendent Pat Deklotz with her idea, and Deklotz directed her to Cushing Principal Rebecca Toetz.

Frans learned that Toetz was frustrated because she was unable to get government grants to help Cushing tutor under-resourced children, unlike the Madison Metropolitan and Sparta school districts where Toetz had previously worked. In those districts, there were a high percentage of students living in poverty.

The Kettle Moraine School District has about 11 percent of its children living at or below the poverty level, according to the state Department of Public Instruction.

"She comes to Delafield, and she keeps getting turned down for grants because everybody else around us has so much money that we don't qualify," said Frans of Toetz's efforts. "Plus, to boot, we don't have the social services in our community like they did because of the incidence of poverty."

Frans had found her niche. She met with her teacher friends and asked if they would tutor kids from families whose parents couldn't afford to pay for them. They willingly agreed, and Frans started the program in September 2015 with 10 tutors and 27 students.

Since those humble beginnings, the program has grown: to 70 students in 2016-17 at Cushing, Wales, KM Explore and Dousman Elementary; and to more than 100 in 2017-18 in those four elementary schools and Kettle Moraine Middle School.



One of Oasis Project's volunteer tutors, Deanna Schadeberg, works with a student during one of the group's tutoring sessions. (Photo: Submitted)

Program structure, impact

The program works by pairing retired and current teachers with students, in partnership with reading specialists and other school specialists. Tutors who teach classes during the day volunteer to work with students after school, while other tutors, such as retired teachers, come in over the lunch period to work with students.

Students are eligible if they are on free or reduced lunch. They may also qualify if there are extenuating circumstances, such as the death of a parent or parents working multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Their efforts are making a difference. In September 2015, Cushing Elementary had 68 percent of its students reading at or below grade level. By January 2016, that number had dropped to 20 percent.

Frans said the progress the students have made is due to the caring nature of those tutors.

"They can focus on the kids," Frans said about the work of the tutors. "The children feel valued, and that's empowering. They feel like they're worth the time, they're worth special attention, they're worth it."

Deklotz said in an informational packet about the program that Oasis' volunteers are invaluable.

"Oasis volunteers not only address academic deficits, they meet social emotional needs of students by demonstrating to these kids that they matter, they can accomplish great things, and they are valued as an individual," said Deklotz in an informational packet about the program.

Pipines has also been inspired by the work Frans has been doing since she asked him to help with the project. He said he has always had a heart for nonprofits, and was shocked after hearing about the poverty in Lake Country. Frans asked him to come visit the program and see what he thought of it.

"Once I got in there and watched these teachers give of themselves — and watched the magic between the young kids, who are probably gifted kids; they just need a chance — she had me hooked," Pipines said.



Dousman Elementary Principal Jeremy Monday (from left), retired Milwaukee sports anchor Tom Pipines, Kettle Moraine Superintendent Pat Deklotz and The Oasis Project Director Jan Frans have a discussion about the program. *(Photo: Submitted)*

Looking ahead

Frans and Pipines spoke about the group to members of Christ the King Lutheran Church in Delafield on April 8.

Frans is seeking donations to hire more staff and to expand the program's reach. She wants to start a teen center in the area, along with a family communications center that serves individuals and families who could benefit from professional counseling. Frans envisions those professionals offering their services pro bono, as many families in need cannot afford such assistance.